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Agenda item 10
Consideration and adoption of the report of the Committee to the General Assembly at its seventy-second session

Draft report

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Chapter III
General debate

1. Statements in the general debate were made by the representatives of Ecuador (on behalf of the Group of 77 and China), El Salvador (on behalf of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States), Peru (on behalf of the Group of Friends of Spanish), Burkina Faso (on behalf of the Group of Francophone Ambassadors), Argentina, Costa Rica, Algeria, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Japan, Senegal, Paraguay, the Russian Federation, Nepal, the Republic of Korea, Belarus, Cuba, Portugal, Brazil, Bangladesh, China, Israel, Pakistan, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the Sudan, India, the United States of America and Morocco; as well as by the observers for the European Union, the State of Palestine and the International Organization of la Francophonie.

2. The general debate was preceded by a statement by the Chair of the Committee, Jan Kickert (Austria). The Chair said that, in a time of viral misinformation and so-called "fake news", effective public information was vital for realizing peace and security, human rights, justice and sustainable development. The United Nations could not achieve the purposes for which it had been created unless the peoples of the world were fully informed of its aims and activities, he asserted. The Acting Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, Maher Nasser, also made a statement and responded to questions and comments by Member States.

3. In addressing the substantive issues before the Committee, representatives shared their perspectives on the state of global media and spotlighted opportunities to raise awareness about the work of the United Nations. Numerous speakers, including several representing large groups, cited successful campaigns around the Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement on climate change and the

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United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III). One speaker, representing a large group, stated that the main goal of disseminating information must be the promotion of peace, cooperation and solidarity among peoples. One representative observed that without the instrumental work of the Department of Public Information the United Nations would be unable to garner the international support necessary to carry out its activities. Delegations also called, however, for the United Nations to better connect with the global public. One speaker stated that the Organization's public information efforts must be sustainable and offer measurable results.

4. One speaker, representing a large group, commended communications and training initiatives of the Department on sexual exploitation and abuse in peacekeeping missions. Emphasizing the Department's pivotal role in combating sexual exploitation and abuse, another representative urged it to support all other departments, in all languages, in that regard.

5. The question of multilingualism remained a priority for many delegations. One speaker, representing a large group, urged a narrowing of the gap among the websites of the six official United Nations languages and requested that the Organization's daily press releases be published in all six official languages, especially in view of a perceived disparity between English and the five other official languages. Several speakers raised concerns about the fact that daily press releases were not issued in all six official United Nations languages, which made it difficult to follow the work of United Nations bodies in a timely fashion and which contributed to inaccessibility and a lack of transparency; and called for a strategy that would ensure delivery of daily press releases in all six official languages. One representative observed that, despite challenges in realizing linguistic parity, a number of important positive developments had been made, including the webcasting of meetings in all six official languages.

6. One speaker, representing a large group, noted the importance of Spanish as the second most widely spoken language in the world and the second most widely used on United Nations websites and other products, and said that the growing interest of Spanish-speaking peoples in the work of the United Nations required the Organization to step up its efforts to respond. Another speaker noted that Chinese was both an official United Nations language and the one with the largest number of speakers worldwide, yet relatively less used in the Department's work and resources, and called on the Department to enhance efforts to promote multilingualism and linguistic parity. One representative encouraged the use of other languages such as Bengali, Hindi, Kiswahili and Portuguese, noting that the latter alone was spoken by some 258 million people around the world. While many speakers acknowledged the need for multilingualism to be mainstreamed in the information and communications activities of the United Nations, and that doing so would increase accountability, transparency, ownership and sustainability, other delegations pointed out a need for this to be accomplished in a cost-neutral manner using existing resources, one speaker noting that innovative, creative approaches could help in addressing such concerns.

7. Several speakers, including one representing a large group, underlined the need to maintain traditional media such as television, radio and print in order to reach large populations without access to the Internet, and also expressed concern that electronic communications had widened the digital divide between developed and developing countries. One speaker observed that, while modern media offered opportunities to expand the Organization's scope and reach, traditional media must also continue to be used in order to ensure that no one was left behind. Another representative expressed the hope that the Department would improve its internal

management of new media so that it would reflect the positions of Member States in a more objective and accurate manner.

8. Some speakers emphasized the need to maintain the Department's neutrality and improve the balance of its news dissemination, while others focused on the rise of disinformation and urged the Committee to mobilize the Department in the global fight against "fake news". Numerous speakers voiced concerns about the potential for the politicization of public information and the possible inappropriate use of modern information and communications technologies to interfere in the internal affairs of sovereign States and destabilize countries and regions in contravention of the principles of the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. One speaker emphasized the critical importance of the Department's work in the light of the recent rise of radical ideologies around the world, and called for an international strategy akin to those developed to combat global epidemics, urging the Committee to develop the necessary recommendations.

9. While a number of delegations voiced strong support for the Special Information Programme on the Question of Palestine, one delegation expressed the view that it offered a biased and misleading narrative of the situation in the region. Several speakers also commended the Department on its training programme for Palestinian journalists.

10. Meanwhile, other speakers considered how the Department could support United Nations efforts to tackle a range of emerging issues, including terrorism, the unprecedented movement of refugees and migrants, and the new concept of "sustaining peace". One speaker counselled the Department to pay attention to Africa's priority needs in formulating effective information policies.

11. One speaker urged the Department to work to deepen public understanding of the Assembly's role, for example, in the selection and election of the Secretary-General. The Department, as another speaker emphasized, served as the voice of the United Nations, and had a critical role in disseminating information about Security Council reform, poverty eradication, dialogue among different peoples, peacekeeping, decolonization and combating terrorism.

12. Representatives roundly praised the work of the United Nations information centres as amplifying the voice of the United Nations throughout the world. The network of information centres played a vital role in mobilizing support for the work of the United Nations and served as an important link between people and the policies and activities undertaken by the Organization by facilitating knowledge about the activities and concerns of the United Nations. Information centres were considered instrumental in building and maintaining the credibility and relevance of the Organization also because they provided important information in local languages to local audiences. Several representatives called for strengthening support for the United Nations information centres, as well as increasing their role.

13. A number of representatives commended the work of the Dag Hammerskjöld library. Several representatives recognized the United Nations Academic Impact for the work that it had done to engage academic and research communities around the world and disseminate information about the United Nations. One delegation urged the Academic Impact initiative to increase its outreach to universities in developing countries. Another speaker, representing a large group, emphasized the importance of developing strategic alliances with academia, the private sector and cultural institutions, which could serve as multipliers of the United Nations message. Another speaker noted with interest the Department's various initiatives to empower young people and give them a voice.

14. Responding to comments and queries made by Member States, the Acting Under-Secretary-General expressed agreement that the principle of multilingualism was critical to the work of the United Nations. The Department was working to utilize partnerships and technology to deliver content in all six official languages, as well as in Kiswahili and Portuguese, whenever possible. He went on to describe a number of cost-effective collaborations that contributed to multilingualism. Guided tours at all United Nations headquarters were available in the six languages as well as local languages, while the network of 63 United Nations information centres worked to amplify the Organization's activities and concerns in both official and local languages. Regarding the Department's daily press releases, the Acting Under-Secretary-General recalled that a recent pilot attempt to translate them into Spanish had proved unsatisfactory, owing to problems of timeliness and accuracy. A proposal for more resources had been made, but ultimately rejected in the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly. Emphasizing that United Nations press releases were not intended to be verbatim records, nor to contain full coverage of intergovernmental meetings, he observed, in view of concerns about discrepancies between language versions, that they were produced under pressure and issued within two hours of a meeting's conclusion. Turning to the increasing use of social media — which many delegations had welcomed but about which they had nevertheless voiced concern — the Acting Under-Secretary-General said that both new and traditional media were integral to the Department's work and would continue to be used in complementary fashion. He also noted that the Department was strengthening its internal oversight over new media accounts and that the membership of developing countries in its Academic Impact initiative was expanding rapidly. He went on to outline the Department's publicizing of United Nations counter-terrorism efforts, including the creation of a dedicated web portal on that subject, and expressed the Department's readiness to identify tools and best practices for tackling the problem of "fake news".